

Sketch

Volume 22, Number 3

1956

Article 8

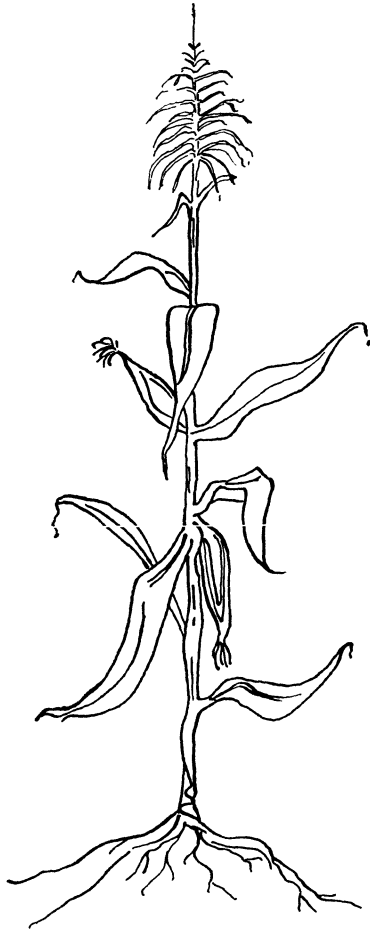
The Green Trap

Joan Wagner*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1956 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

THE GREEN TRAP



HERE they come. Straggling out of the rows, shoulders drooping, feet shuffling. Their last day. Their last field. Just two rows left, but I can't send any of these beat kids back in. O.K., O.K. So I'll be a softy.

"You kids go take a break — I'll get a couple a slackers to take these last rows."

Look at those grins. Like I'd just handed them a cool chocolate soda, or something. Wish I could crawl over to that gorgeous water cooler and collapse, too. Guess I'll have

to do these stinkin' rows myself. It won't quite kill me. Just have to detassel both sides of one goin' down, and work the other double row back. My knees feel like they're goin' to buckle — but this is my last day, my last field, too. Hell, I always seem to get the raw deals, though.

I'm in the green trap for the last time. I've finally learned. It never changes. Always end up with all the energy wrung out of me. What a hot, brutal, filthy job. But I always come back for more every year . . .

Boy, was I a green one that first year. We signed up — my friends and I — like we were invited on a picnic. Thinking it was cute to add a couple of inches to our height and ten or twenty pounds to our weight to make our applications rate better. Cripes, we shouldn't have worried — they took everyone fool enough to apply. All I had to do was climb on that bus . . .

"Hey, you guys! The bus is nearly full already. Looks like we're too late."

The big, fat driver leaned out the window and shouted, "Get a move on, pile in, I haven't got all day."

Pile in where? One by one we pushed on the bus, and somehow all managed to sit down, whether it was three to a seat or on the floor. I was the last one in, and headed over to the only seat left with just two girls in it.

"Where you think you're goin', squirt?"

The two stared at me hostilely.

"No place."

I squatted on the filthy, littered floor, and the bus jolted on its way.

From where I sat — on the floor — I could hear scraps of indecent jokes the two girls were telling each other. Even sitting down, they looked big. Near six feet each, at least. One was slim and wholesome-looking, like a farmer's freckled daughter. The other sat shorter than the first, and was broad with muscles and big bones. Her face was wide and stupid-looking. They wore grimy work clothes in contrast to the white, ironed shirt I wore, borrowed from my dad. Once in a while I heard them refer to the "greenies," and I decided they must be old hands. That made me a "greenie," and I felt somehow ashamed of it.

A little blond friend of mine, also forced to sit on the

floor, leaned over and whispered, "Don't mind those two. Everyone in town knows what they are."

"Oh? What?"

"Well, they've got horrible reputations. You know."

So these two self-assured kids who think they know it all are *that* kind. So maybe they've been at this detassling kick longer than I have. They're not so hot. I'll show them. Make me sit on the floor on this dirty old bus. Well, I'll prove I can do just as good a job as any big, dumb — well, prostitutes!

When we reached the first field that morning, I was the first one out of the bus, the first one in the field, and the first one done with a row. But — by midmorning, the two big girls, with their superior strength and endurance, seemed to be conspiring with the hell-hole a corn field can become. I didn't have a chance. The lead of rows I'd built up was wiped out and reversed by those two steadily working machines.

The next day was worse, and the third day I felt like my face was being ground in the mud. And they knew. They knew somehow that I had been silently fighting them, silently working against them. They laughed at me. Not out loud, but I could feel it, whenever they looked at me. Oh, sure, the old guard laughed at all the greenies — but these two seemed my personal hecklers.

They laughed at my clean, neat clothes. So I came dressed grubbier than they did. They laughed when I got sick in the middle of the corn field after eating sugary cupcakes and Kool-Ade, and greasy mayonnaise on peanut butter sandwiches. So I went right on working, and heaved, and went back to work again. They laughed when I couldn't take a break at the end of the rows by smoking a cigarette with the foreman — like they did. So I secretly practiced smoking at night, and then one day proudly whipped out my own pack of cigarettes and lit up. They laughed when I blushed at their filthy jokes and songs, so I learned jokes just as bad, and songs that were worse. And to swear, especially to swear. No detasseler's vocabulary was adequate if she couldn't swear. Unless she was poetic, and could say it's as hot as a smelting furnace, instead of it's hot as hell. And then she wouldn't have belonged.

I wanted to belong. But the tough kids, the veterans, were exclusive. At noon, there would be two separate circles. The raw recruits eating in one, the seasoned old-timers in

another. No one felt the distinction more than I did.

I guess I just admired the physical strength of those two girl-mountains. Yet I couldn't admire their activities outside of detassling. But as the days went by, I found I placed more importance on my standing in their eyes than I ever had in anybody else's.

I somehow managed to stick it through the whole tassel season. A hard pride grew in me as one by one, kids dropped out because they couldn't take it. By the end of the season I was as black as the fellows on a construction crew. The muscle in my right arm was developed into a satisfying hard knot. Coming home that last day, sweaty and grimy, I looked and felt like a tough kid from the other side of the tracks. And I was glad.

For three years I softened up and paled over the winter, but came back for the old punishment every summer. And so did The Two. Each year I looked for them first, and was never disappointed. And each year, there were still two separate groups. Now, though, one group was made up of toughs, whether green or not, and the other, of the "good" girls. As my experience increased, I became the center of my group. The Two had always been the center of theirs . . .

Can't understand why it seemed such a blow my third year of detasseling when I discovered my two weren't on my bus. Been assigned to another crew. Somehow the challenge kinda went out of detasseling. Wasn't long before I heard of The Two, though. The story I heard couldn't help making me laugh — it was so typical of them . . .

Near the last day of the season, the temperatures reached successfully for 110. Walking down those rows at midday can be hell. The Two decided to do a strip job in the middle of the field. Detasseling naked didn't seem to phase them. The heat was unbearable, and besides, they had a woman foreman. When they came out of the field at the far end, they ran smack dab into the area field checker — a cynical, hardened man. He just stood there, speechless. The tall one of the two quietly remarked, "What the hell you staring at, Grandpa?" And with that calm comment, The Two strolled casually back into the field, dressed, and finished their rows . . .

Can't imagine me getting myself in that kind of a pickle. Yet I woulda bolted. They've sure got guts. This year, my

fourth and final year I was kinda glad The Two were back detasseling, back in my crew. But this year started out just like all the others, otherwise . . .

"All right, you guys, spread out, grab a row and get goin'."

I can spot the green kids already. They jump to it and race down the rows — for the first half-day. They'll learn. Me, I'm a veteran. I've learned to move slow and work easy. You last longer that way.

I ambled over to a vacant row and stuck my marked stake in the caked dirt. Then I started plodding down the row.

The sun was warm and good on my back. With practiced eye I judged which tassels had spread enough for picking, and which could get by the checker's critical eye. One, two — one, two. The old rhythm came back easily. Walking with right arm outstretched, I grabbed a tassel, tugged, and let it slip through my fingers, barely slowing my steps. The blades slapped wetly against me as I walked, and the earth was still damp beneath my bare feet. Never could get over how cool and inviting a corn field looked when I wasn't in it. I wasn't kidding myself, though. By noon each blade would be hot and raspy, slowing me down, slicing my bare and burned skin.

What a crew we had this year! More tough-looking beginners than usual. Those kind break in easy.

I heard a familiar rustle behind me. Someone — foreman or checker — was fast coming up. Damn! That's what I get for thinking. No matter how automatic it gets, you still can't afford to think. Then you start missing tassels.

"Hello, Schneider. How's it coming?"

Cripes, it's one of the big wheels, checking the sections.

"Fine, sir, fine. And how's your wife, sir?"

"Oh, she's still got something wrong with her blood. Went for another check-up this morning."

"Gee, that's too bad." The old bastard. Wish he'd come to the point. If I've been missin' 'em, I've been missin' 'em. So what the hell!

"Schneider, how'd you like to be checker for this crew?"

"Well —"

"You get more pay. A buck an hour, not bad for a seasonal job. And two bucks on Sundays and for any clean-up work your crew does after the bulk of the crews are released."

"Well —"

"No detasseling. Just see they pick 'em clean. All ya gotta do is walk."

"I'm not sure —"

"Second in command to the foreman. Can take breaks whenever you want. Well, Schneider, what do you say?"

"Well — why me?"

"You've got the most consecutive years of workin' for us piled up."

"But what about The Two — I mean, what about Maggie and Mary?"

"Who?"

"Wand and Neilson,"

"Oh. Well—uh—you see, well, you heard about the little skirmish they got into with that section boss last year —"

He laughed, a little lewdly, a little embarrassed. But not much, because I was just a detasseler, not a lady.

"Well, Schneider?" "O.K. by me, sir."

He turned and disappeared down the row. What a mess. "O.K. by me, sir." Sure, just peachy. Now those two broads would really be on my neck. But a dollar an hour. No sore arms. Sounded too much like a decent job to be true.

From then on, I was really in for it. Especially since I'd told someone in the crew a distant cousin of mine was a big wheel in this corn company. The Big Two didn't say a word, though. They just looked.

As checker, I had the power to fire anyone who got out of line. The trouble was, everyone did, and I couldn't fire the whole crew. No use just asking for the sack myself.

My first day as checker went off pretty smooth, considering I was a little swelled-headed and threw my weight around. The greenies were soon terrified of me, even more than of our foreman. We drove them hard, but they shaped up fast. I hated to fire those green ones though. They usually cried. But some of them were so sick and tired of the whole mess they didn't care. Sometimes they were even grateful.

The old tough core was the meanest group, the most hard to discipline but the best damn workers. We needed them, and they knew it. Yet sometimes they got too cocky, like the time I counted twenty-two marked rows to twenty-one girls that had checked in that day. Someone was detasseling for two. I waited.

Pretty soon, the Big Two came out of their rows, picked up their stakes, and then one took the extra stake.

"All right, what's the deal?"

"What's it to you, Shorty?" The broad one stared back at me, daring me, egging me on. "So we're detasseling extra hard today so a sick friend of ours won't miss out on a day's pay. We're working for it. Hell, that's no crime."

All right, Sandy, think fast. "Look, you guys. Everyone who detassels, no matter how fast or good they work, has to put up with the stinkin' dirt and heat and sore muscles. It doesn't make any difference how hard you guys work, you still don't have it any hotter or dirtier than the rest. So you're being big-hearted. Well, if your friend wants her money, let her work for it." I turned, considering the matter closed, hoping like fury they did too.

"O.K., boss." The tallest one's sarcasm was enough to curdle cream. But the crew numbered the same as the stakes from then on.

Several days later, I heard by the grapevine that the Big Ones' girl friend had skipped town with a couple of men, and was in a Nebraska jail for "disturbing the peace." I wondered if The Two realized I saved them from working for nothing, for a girl that could never show up to claim her paycheck. It looked like I'd just have to wonder . . .

It wasn't long before I discovered checking was for the birds. If it wasn't the walkin', it was some sort of trouble I had to handle. Something seemed to come up every day that nearly scared the liver out of me — like that fight . . .

What in the hell are they up to now? Look's like they're watching some sort of fight. These damn kids, always looking for trouble.

I marched over to the ring of intent girls, and pushed my way to the middle. Then I stopped cold. The girl getting the worst of the fight had spun loose, and pulled a knife. She advanced, furious, on her opponent.

I've got to do something. It's up to me. Up to me. "Hey!" I yelled. The sound stood out in a dead silence, trembling and naked. The girl with the knife spun toward me, not particular about which one she carved up. The Two stood behind me. I couldn't back up, and she was coming toward me.

"You're — you're fired," I squeaked.

She stopped, and just looked at me. Then she deliberately, dramatically put away her knife, turned, then scornfully returned to the bus.

Someone giggled nervously. Then I heard The Two, laughing, hysterically laughing, laughing so hard they couldn't stand up, then laughing as they rolled on the ground. Gasping something like, "All right for you, if you cut me up I'll fire you." And I knew I still didn't belong . . .

And now, it's the last day. The last field. My last row. And the stinkin' thing must be a miler. This is the last time I'll play martyr. Good lord, I should think I'd learn my lesson.

Muscles sure get out of shape fast. Forgot that a checker's arms get as soft as a greenies. My legs shouldn't feel so punk though. Should be extra tough with all the walkin' I have to do.

Hey — either I'm getting sun-punchy, or a couple of angels are coming to meet me! Angels, hell — it's those two six-footers. Well, what do you know.

"Hi, you great big beautiful dolls. You don't have a gallon of water on you, do you?"

"No, short-stuff. Looks like you could use a stretcher better."

"Boy, are you two the greatest."

"Aw, come on. If we hadn't come to get you, you'd have been stuck in this stinkin' cornfield all day."

Like I said before, you never can tell. Those two big broads, coming through after all. And here I am, talking to them like long-last buddies. Just a few more yards, and we'll be out of this green trap, though, out for good.

Suddenly the two girls turned on me, grabbed me, and swung me off my feet. "What the hell —" My stomach twisted. I thought of the girl and her knife, and the stories of what happened in the privacy of cornfields.

Before I could react and fight back, I found myself sitting on their shoulders. They marched out of the field, and there — in front of me — was my crew.

"Some big wheel sent us a barrel of pop!" someone yelled.

Then, feeling like the guy who kicks a field goal in the last minute of play, I was paraded over and set down in front of the mirage of bottles.

"For she's a jolly good checker, for she's a jolly good

checker," one of The Two started singing, and the whole crew joined in.

"Lay off, you guys!" I felt all watery inside.

"Say —"

I looked up at the broad one, towering over me. She just stood there, eyes lowered, scuffing the ground with one bare, grimy foot.

"Well, what?"

Then, in a tumbling rush of words — "We've got the best damn crew ever. And a hell of a good checker is worth all the rest put together."

"Aw, come off it —"

"No, listen, Sandy. I mean it. If you hadn't kept on our tails we never would a shaped up. And that would have meant no extra clean-up work. No clean-up pay. Hell, you know what I mean."

She stuck out her hand, and I took it.

"See you next year, huh, Sandy?"

"You bet. I'll be back."

—Joan Wagner, *T. J.*, *Soph.*



NO QUITTER

THE smooth, yet biting aroma of coffee filled the room . . . intermittent clanks of silver on pottery broke the silence . . . then, suddenly, the juke box let loose . . . crying the latest "rock-'n-roll blues" number . . .

"I'm gonna rock-'n-roll . . .

Don't want those blues . . .

Those rock-'n roll blues . . .

I just wanna rock! . . . and roll!"

Cram looked at Harlan . . . the younger man was stirring his coffee slowly . . . studying the hot blackness as he stirred it. His lanky frame was stretched to its fullest length on the uncomfortable wooden bench.

"Let's have it, Harlan, . . . why?"

"Why . . . ?" He said it slowly . . . as if pondering the